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ABSTRACT

This article aims to strengthen the ability of parents of special needs children to function as stronger, more resilient parents by developing coping mechanisms. Coping mechanisms include allowing oneself to cry, dealing with anger, determining objectively the reasons for the anger, using anger constructively, finding support, becoming flexible, and taking charge of those life elements that are controllable. The article concludes with a section of "do's" and "don'ts." (JDD)

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Special Parent Special Child

VOL. 6, NO. 3 MAY/JUNE 1990

HOW TO DEVELOP COPING SKILLS

Rearing a special child requires strength, stamina and a unique ability to bounce back. As one special mother commented, "It's not that I don't love my child—I really do—but sometimes I feel so depressed, angry and alone that I wonder how I'm going to get through." At some point the challenge of parenting a special child presents such a problem that many parents feel they just can't cope. In the case of the special parent coping means the ability to handle situations that arise with an *attitude of determination* that you can function effectively no matter what. It means being able to handle emotional responses and feelings so that they don't overwhelm and complicate the issue and to feel you are able to exercise a certain amount of control over events as they crop up.

In this issue we will focus on developing coping mechanisms that will strengthen your ability to function as a stronger, more resilient parent.

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Handling feelings

In order to develop the determined, positive attitude essential to being able to cope, it's best to determine first exactly how you feel. Paradoxically, this does not mean repressing your true feelings—quite the opposite. It has been widely documented that keeping things bottled up inside often results in anxiety and depression. It can also contribute to a variety of stress-related illnesses including insomnia, headaches and ulcers. A good way to begin

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to develop coping skills is to allow your true feelings and emotions to surface.

Allow yourself to cry. Our society places great value on appearing strong and brave even in the face of tragic or saddening events. As children we are told "big girls don't cry." As adults we routinely squelch our strongest emotions in the mistaken belief that becoming tearful means we have lost control.

One of the best ways, however, to relieve emotional stress or sorrow is through tears. Researchers have analyzed the content of tears shed in stress or grief and have found they differ from those shed in laughter. They have theorized that crying is the body's way of ridding itself of harmful toxins and that crying is a physiological as well as emotional safety valve that restores balance and well-being.

Deal with anger. Anger often wells up at unexpected times, thwarting our efforts to cope or function rationally. However, it's equally unwise to deny or mask our anger; anger that is turned inward is linked to depression, hostility and misplaced aggression.

The best way of dealing with anger is to examine openly the situations that have provoked the anger; then try to use the anger as a catalyst for positive action. Here are some helpful strategies:

Admit that you are angry. The first step in dealing with anger is to recognize when you feel angry. Many of us push aside anger because we fear our own loss of control.

Identify the source of your anger. Instead of lashing out at the first convenient target, stop and ask, "Who or what am I really angry at?" You may be angry at everything because life has dealt you such a blow. Or you may be angry at your disabled child because she's handicapped and requires so much care. Maybe you're annoyed at your child's teacher or doctor. It doesn't make much difference if your anger is justifiable or not—any anger has to be worked through in order to be channeled.

Determine why you are angry as objectively as you can. Often our anger is misplaced or is a smokescreen we set up to hide our true feelings. Are you angry at the doctor because your child's diagnosis is so hard to accept? Are you angry at the school because your child is unable to achieve grade level success as normal children

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do? Are you angry at yourself because you can't change things to your liking?

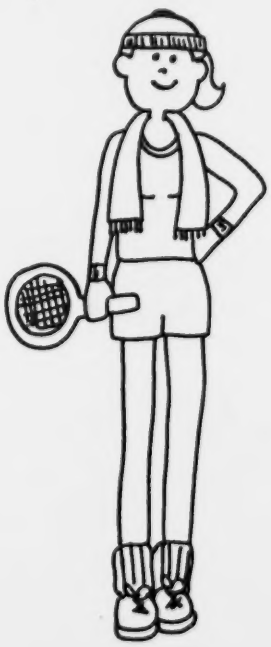
Combat your anger. After you have determined the causes of your anger the next step in diffusing it is to remove it from the emotional arena.

- Write down *all* your angry thoughts, no matter how extreme they are. Getting things down on paper often reduces their intensity.
- Use mental imagery. Visualize yourself acting out your innermost rages with no recourse or recrimination, i.e. screaming at your mother-in-law for her meddling, the neighbors for their pitying looks or your spouse because he's always out of town when you need him.
- Then put yourself in the other person's shoes. Your mother-in-law is probably trying to be helpful, the neighbors think they are being kind, your husband's schedule is not to his liking either. Recognize that often it is not the situation per se that produces anger, it is our own interpretation of events that is emotionally charged. Since you are the one who has painted the picture, it is you and only you who can change the scenario.

Communicate your anger effectively. Often the people you are most angry with are unaware that their behavior has contributed to your anger. Expressing your anger as calmly as possible gives people the opportunity to recognize that things are amiss. Nodding your head "yes" while seething inside does not produce constructive change. Perhaps your anger has clouded the issue and led you to misperceive people's motives or actual events. It is only through honest expression of what is bothering you that you will be able to put things into proper perspective.

Channel your anger into physical or mental activity. Participating in such activities as swimming, jogging or competitive sports are well known antidotes because they relieve the stress of pent-up anger. Attending competitive sporting events, watching an emotionally-draining film or immersing yourself in an exciting book are other good sources of release.

Use your anger constructively. Once you have determined that your anger is persistent, justifiable and grounded in situations that warrant change—don't be afraid of legitimizing them. Remember that it was angry parents who felt their children's needs were not being met that mobilized and formed organizations such as the Association for Retarded Children (ARC) and United Cerebral Palsy (UCP). It was also concerned parents who advocated for the passage of PL94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act.



Finding support

Going it alone when you have a disabled child can often rob you of the support systems that help you to cope. Sharing ideas and feelings diminishes the damaging impact they can have. Talking things over with other parents, joining parent support or advocacy groups or working toward better services for your child will give you the opportunity to channel your energies positively. Just the knowledge that other parents feel as you do and share your frustrations and qualms can make your own situation not as lonely or grim.

Sometimes it is helpful to be able to talk things over with a close friend, member of the clergy or therapist; someone who is a good listener and has a sympathetic ear can render much needed assistance.

Becoming flexible

The old adage that "the reed that bends does not break" takes on added meaning when there is a special child in the family. The ability to anticipate the unexpected, being able to switch gears, having a back-up plan at all times are essential coping strategies. It is also axiomatic that special children require more supervision, have longer dependency stages

and require more care. Setting rigid standards or expectations on how and when things should be done can only complicate the situation.

Decide what is important. Making demands on yourself and other family members for a perfect household or spreading yourself too thinly among job, home and community obligations can overwhelm and compromise effective family functioning. Instead, sit down with family members and plan together how to make things easier. Reorganize the household so that chores are shared. For example, adjust schedules and plan menus that are nutritious but easy to prepare.

Build more time into the daily routine, so that no one feels pressured. Allow time with nothing planned so that everyone in the family can follow their own pursuits. When you do gather concentrate on activities that everyone enjoys, discarding obligations or commitments that are non-essential. Perhaps the fact that there is a special family member will help you to focus on what is really important and meaningful in your life. Adopting this kind of lifestyle or attitude is an excellent way of coping.

Taking charge

Nothing is more destructive to parents than feeling that they have no control over what has befallen them. When their child requires extensive intervention from school professionals, therapists or medical specialists, parents are likely to feel even more helpless. Feelings of dependency can often promote a defeatist attitude that undermines efforts to cope with even day-to-day events.

One way of gaining a healthier perspective is to put things down in black and white. Make a complete inventory of all the things that are bothering you—even those that appear trivial. Go over eveything you have written down and make two lists. Label the first list "can"; on this one put down the things you feel you can do something about. Label the other list "can't" and on that one write down those things you feel can't be changed.

Look at your "can" list and see if you can come up with ways to modify these problems or to exert control. For example, if chaotic breakfast times are annoying everyone, change things such as laying out clothes, packing lunches and setting the breakfast table the night before. Solving minor problems like this one will give you the confidence to tackle the serious ones.

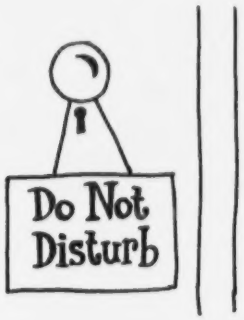
For example, perhaps you are dissatisfied with your child's doctor but don't know how to handle this effectively. Think of how you can take charge—resolve that you are going to schedule an appointment to talk over the issues that are of concern. Write down questions ahead of time. If you are still dissatisfied afterwards, remember that you have the right to change doctors if need be. What is most important is that *you* have made the decisions, others have not made them for you.

When reviewing your lists, it is likely that while there are many items on your "can" list that lend themselves to change, the number of things on your "can't" list are of a more serious nature. Dealing with those things that can't be changed requires changing the way you think about them. Acknowledge that feelings of anger or guilt or disappointment will occur and reoccur. It's a good idea not to project too far in the future and to recognize that sometimes things change on their own or become less hopeless as they once seemed.

Often out of a disastrous situation come opportunities—to gain maturity, to surprise yourself with strengths you never knew you had, to develop closer, more meaningful relationships with others and to cherish good times even more when they do occur.

Do's and don'ts

Do try to reach out to help others. This is an excellent coping strategy because commitment to others or to a worthwhile cause makes you feel good about yourself and reduces psychic energy expended on feeling unhappy about your lot in life.



Do try to develop a sense of humor. Laughter releases tension and relaxes us physically and emotionally. Watching amusing movies or reading light fiction can put us in a much more pleasant frame of mind.

Do get plenty of rest. Feeling fatigued or tired and out-of-sorts compromises our coping abilities even more.

Do focus time and energy on a hobby or pastime that fascinates you and holds your attention completely. This will relax and invigorate you which is essential to coping.

Do keep a journal of events. It needn't be day-by-day, if this is too time consuming. Putting things down in writing is often a good way of releasing emotions. It's also an excellent way of charting progress or keeping track of the good times as well as the bad.

Do set up consistent schedules. Having an accepted routine for meal preparation, bed time and household chores puts continuity and order into the day. This helps the whole family to cope.

PSYCHOLOGIST'S CORNER

Coping with frustration

by George Popper, Ph. D.

Your child is struggling with arithmetic and you've spent several nights teaching her the intricacies of adding two-digit numbers. It hasn't been easy, but at long last you've succeeded. A day later your child brings home her math test along with an accompanying letter saying that she has failed and needs more help with addition. Your heart sinks to your knees as anger and frustration build up within you like an erupting volcano. How could she do this to you? After all, you're absolutely certain that she went into that test knowing her facts. What could have gone wrong? Where did you fail her?

As the parent of a special child (or any child for that matter), you probably have undergone some similar frustrating experience. Frustrations occur when the outcome of a particular event does not go the way we want it to go or when we are unable to control the situation the way we believe we

should. Often our frustrations are based on a series of *mistaken beliefs and perceptions.* It is only through an understanding of these perceptions and beliefs that we will be better able to cope with their effects.

The well known psychologist Albert Ellis, a leading proponent of a rational approach to dealing with life, recommends that we concentrate our efforts on understanding and coping with the *situation* rather than succumbing to the resultant emotions. Many of us tend to view things in the extreme, perceiving frustration as catastrophic. As Ellis points out, *even though being frustrated is not particularly pleasant, it doesn't have to be a disaster unless we think of it that way.*

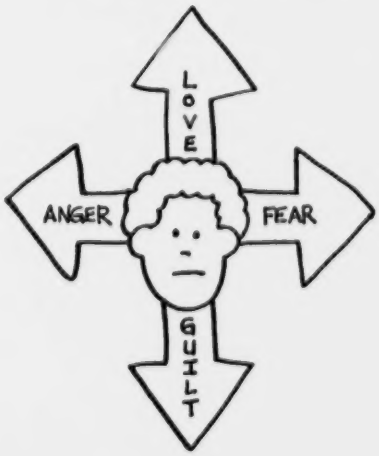
Believe it or not, people make themselves upset and depressed. The idea that someone or something else makes us feel the way we do is simply untrue. As adults we are accountable for the way we feel.

As special parents there are things that happen that we really can't change. If we wish to add to the problem by making ourselves depressed and miserable then we certainly have it within our power to do just that! What is important to understand is that the self-pity and misery we heap on ourselves limit our effectiveness at dealing with the very situation we want so desperately to change.

We also have it within our power to make a reasonable, honest appraisal of what we can and cannot do. Learning how to accept events that are inevitable and learning to cope with reality is part of being an adult. Dr. Ellis very aptly observes that reality may thwart your efforts at attaining a goal and may put all sorts of obstacles in your way, but it can't fully defeat you—only you can do that.

The difficulty seems to be that whenever we are faced with some of life's frustrations we sometimes lose our ability to think rationally. Instead we resort to magical and often mistaken beliefs that solve very little and that serve no useful purpose other than to add to our problems.

Perhaps one of the most exasperating situations that the parent



of a special child can face is their child's education. Dealing with teachers, social workers, psychologists, politicians and administrators can throw even the best of us into a tailspin.

What can a parent do to cope? Feeling frustrated and depressed will only make things much worse. If we allow ourselves to feel defeated then we are defeated; the choice is ours. Instead try a few of the following to alleviate frustrations:

- educate yourself about the nature of the problem
- learn about your rights and your child's rights
- become part of an active parent support group
- start your own support group
- become politically aware.

Readers may want to refer to: *A New Guide to Rational Living* by A. Ellis, Ph.D., and R. A. Harper, Ph.D. (Wilshire Book Company, 1977)

Companion issues to read

Vol. 1 No. 6
FOCUS ON THE FAMILY
• sibling and family relationships • support groups • finding help • holiday blues

Vol. 3 No. 6
DEALING WITH STRESS
• recognizing, reducing, avoiding stress • the special parent and stress • easing guilt

Vol. 5 No. 6
NURTURING YOUR MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP
• dealing with feelings • working as a team • learning to nurture each other • the single parent

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